

# North Georgia News

75¢

2 Sections 24 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

www.nganews.com

Legal Organ of Union County

Your Hometown Newspaper Since 1909

Wednesday, June 18, 2025

## Gun Club disbands a year after achieving goal

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

It could be said that determination and faith built the Union County Gun Range, a roughly \$4 million facility that opened last summer after years of tireless advocacy by former Sheriff Mack Mason and the everyday citizens who formed the Union County Gun Club for that singular purpose. Having realized their goal and cemented a generational legacy for the county, Gun Club members voted to disband their eight-year-old organization in a called meeting at the Union County Sports Center on Tuesday, June 10.

Gun Club President Paul Clark said the decision came down to reasons of practicality; simply put, the club no longer has a reason to continue.

Originally, the club envisioned privately operating the range with limited public hours, but there ended up being a major catch: to secure the federal funding required to complete such an ambitious project, the range had to be made totally public.

That meant the Recreation Department of Union County Government would run the facility, in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service and Georgia Department of Natural Resources – leaving no room for the Gun Club to manage the range as initially planned.

Therefore, since the club had achieved its ultimate aim of acquiring a local range, and without club-specific benefits such as private shooting matches due to the public nature of the facility, an overwhelming majority of

members who attended the meeting last week resolved that it was time to disband.

"We accomplished something that's great, and we do have an exceptionally wonderful range," Clark said.

Figuratively speaking, the Gun Club and its dedicated Board of Directors moved mountains to establish the range, despite starting with little more than a hope, a prayer and plenty of doubts from onlookers that such a task could be accomplished.

The club created bylaws, elected true servant-leaders, set up a well-organized and highly effective outreach campaign, and raised tens of thousands of dollars toward achieving its goal.

And the Gun Club succeeded in spectacular fashion, with the final product

serving as an extraordinary testament to what can be accomplished when ordinary, civic-minded people come together in common cause.

It all began when then-Sheriff Mason put out a call to local Second Amendment enthusiasts on July 10, 2017, asking people to join him in pursuing a range.

For years, Mason and others had been looking to find a place for locals to shoot. At the time, deputies and officers were having to rely on a gracious private property owner to practice for state-mandated firearm qualifications, and residents had to drive to other counties to shoot.

With the formation of the Gun Club, the idea was to create a dedicated space for all kinds of shooters, from beginners to seasoned practitioners – a

place for individuals to hone their skills, for families to learn together, and for local law enforcement to drill and certify their expertise.

At the outset, the club imagined something similar to the neighboring Chatuge Gun Club Range, which sits on Forest Service land in Towns County and features a 10-position covered shed for shooting at distances of 7 to 100 yards.

Through the course of the club's outreach, first to the Commissioner's Office and then to state and federal elected officials and agencies, the concept grew beyond all expectations.

Thanks to the outsized vision of then-Commissioner Lamar Paris, in concert with Mason as Gun Club Adviser and the club's Board of Directors,



the initial, humble idea became a multimillion-dollar project backed by 90% federal funding, with the remainder paid for in SPLOST.

Mason and the Gun Club Board acquired the federal funding through diligent networking and good old-fashioned sticktoitiveness, partnering with the Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to receive the funds to build the county range.

Now a year on from opening, the local facility

See Gun Club, Page 2A

## Blairsville Pro Rodeo to ride high this weekend

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Rain or shine, the Blairsville Pro Rodeo will return for its 14th year this Friday, June 20, and Saturday, June 21, for two evenings of traditional American family fun at the Union County Horse Arena, courtesy of the Union County Saddle Club.

This event has come a long way since its humble beginnings when three Saddle Club members collaborated with the Blue Ridge Rodeo to start up "some clean, family-oriented entertainment."

"I feel that rodeos are so popular around here because there are a lot of horse people and it is clean entertainment for the family," said Kayla Murphy, Union County Saddle Club Secretary & Blairsville Pro Rodeo Committee Chair. The rodeo is iconic in America, and mountain residents don't have to head out West to see some truly awe-inspiring performances. Cowboys and cowgirls, Murphy said, train for years to perfect their stunts, often starting as soon as they're big enough to sit in the saddle or throw a rope.

This year's action includes the ever-popular bull riding along with bareback bronco riding, saddleback riding, ranch riding, barrel racing, steer wrestling, team roping, tie-down roping, and break-away roping. Contenders are sourced from



**Bull riding is a particularly high-octane sport that will be bringing to town multiple daring riders June 20-21 for the return of the IPRA-sanctioned Blairsville Pro Rodeo.**

Photo by Lowell Nicholson/2021

all over the Southeast.

New to the lineup is trick riding courtesy of Emily Moss, which involves the rider performing daring feats on horseback. This includes everything from standing up in the saddle to the death drag, a stunt where the rider hangs sideways, head perilously close to the ground and hooves.

"We try to always change up a few things from year to year," Murphy explained, adding that there will also be a new rodeo clown to entertain the masses.

Both nights will open with a tribute to armed forces, police officers and first responders, and there are

other special events added to this year's lineup. Guests can enter a free raffle to win \$5,000 in cash or one of two pairs of Durango brand boots.

"Rodeos have been around for decades. It reminds people of how we all started, when things were 'simpler,'" Murphy said of the time-honored tradition. "The cowboys and cowgirls keep that alive."

Speaking of which, there will be chances to get little guys and gals roped into finding the culture interesting.

Along with a mechanical bull and bounce house, they can try their hands at the calf scramble

See Blairsville Pro Rodeo, Page 2A

## Mary Nelson Seabolt celebrates 107th birthday

A very Happy Birthday to local centenarian Mary Nelson Seabolt, who celebrated her 107th birthday on June 8 with family and friends.

Mary was born in the Arkaquah area of Union County on June 8, 1918. Her family raised corn as she was coming up, which meant that young Mary spent some time in the corn fields as well.

She remained in Arkaquah until she married Zed William Seabolt in 1940, and they had three children, Jerrell, John and Ray, who carried on the family farming tradition growing corn, raising cane and making sorghum syrup – an operation that continues to this day.

Sole Commissioner Harold Collins visited with Mary recently, which he chronicled in a recent "From Your Commissioner" column published in the North Georgia News.

Collins believes Mary might just be the oldest living resident of Union County, and he enjoyed hearing some stories from Mary's youth



Mary Nelson Seabolt

while speaking with her and son Ray.

"She giggled as she told me a tale about one time when she attempted to 'weed' the

corn field, but in doing so, she cut down everything – including the corn," Collins said. "Her Dad quickly taught

See Happy Birthday, Page 2A

## State investigating death of prisoner from Union County

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

The Georgia Department of Corrections is investigating the June 9 death of an inmate from Union County who was serving a lengthy sentence at Johnson State Prison, a medium security facility located about four hours south of here in Wrightsville.

Paul Brewster, 48, was serving 20 years for Burglary in the First Degree and Obstruction of a Law Enforcement Officer out of Union County, with a maximum release date of December 2037, according to the Department of Corrections.

"The body was turned

over to the county coroner and will be transported to the GBI crime lab to determine the official cause of death," said GDC Communications Director Joan Heath. "The death is being investigated by the GDC's Office of Professional Standards, as standard procedure."

Heath went on to say that additional details were not currently available, as the investigation remains ongoing.

Brewster's sentence came by way of conviction in connection with a string of crimes committed Oct. 15-16, 2023.

At the time, the Union County Sheriff's Office was



able to connect Brewster to multiple break-ins and stolen items at several businesses and properties, including Gooch Trucking, Aspen Hearth & Home, the Saddle Club Arena and Pleasant Grove Baptist Church.

## Tune in to local Will Potts at the Grand Ole Opry

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Blairsville youth Will Potts will soon be performing at the legendary Grand Ole Opry alongside Trey Hensley and the Appalachian Road Show. The 22-year-old has maintained a lifelong passion for music, and he is now heading to one of the most prestigious stages in the country to play.

Though there's no way to stream or watch a televised performance of Potts' appearance, a few dedicated fans are driving up to Nashville to see him live on-stage, and locals can listen from home via 650 AM on internet radio apps TuneIn and iHeart Radio at 7 p.m. June 24 and July 1.

"He was really always interested in music," recalls his father, Gerald Potts. "He always had some kind of guitar, even when he was just real little. He was shown a few chords and just did it like it was natural to him."

Officially, Potts developed an interest in the



**Talented musician Will Potts of Blairsville will be performing standup bass at the Grand Ole Opry this month and next.**

Photo/Submitted

electric bass at age 12, and two weeks after picking it up, he began performing in church. Going on to specialize in the

same instrument in the Union County Middle School Jazz Band, he made his mark early

See Grand Ole Opry, Page 2A

Vol. 116 No. 26

Arrests - 11A    Legals - 9B  
Church - 2B    Obits - 4B  
Classifieds - 9B    Sports - 8A  
Opinion - 4A

**2025 Made In Georgia Festival June 28 & 29** See Page 2A

**Union County Cancer Survivors Luncheon June 28** See Page 6A

**Union County Schools FY26 Tentative Budget** See Page 11A

**Need a mortgage?**  
Let our Dream Team help you make home ownership a reality.

**Kitty Mauzy**  
706-439-2185  
NMLS #512515

**United Community Mortgage**  
© 2025 United Community Bank | NMLS #421841 | [ucbi.com/mortgage](http://ucbi.com/mortgage)

**Kim Walker**  
706-439-2164  
NMLS #1205994



# Gun Club...from Page 1A

features a 25-yard pistol range with 10 shooting benches and a 150-yard rifle range with 14 benches. There’s also a main office and instructional building to offer classes, bathrooms, shooting supplies and other amenities on the property.

Of course, the project came with numerous challenges. For starters, while the club enjoyed an auspicious beginning with more than 200 members and \$1,600 raised the same evening it was founded, the effort commenced with no land and relatively little money, albeit plenty of grit.

The club had no initial prospects for a range location, and many people thought it would be impossible to find a suitable property, either for reasons of affordability or because there would be too much red tape to secure a federal lease.

Fortunately, then-Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue – himself a Second Amendment enthusiast after whom the road leading into the Gun Range was eventually named – and USDA State Director for Georgia Joyce White, appointed by President Trump, showed a willingness to work with Mason and the Gun Club, culminating in the county leasing a 14-acre parcel

of Forest Service land for the range off Georgia 180.

Still, there were many hoops to jump through – public commenting, multiple sound tests, laborious land-use negotiations, extensive engineering, construction challenges, etc. – but club members had faith in the effort and saw the range through to completion.

Last year, the club presented the Commissioner’s Office a \$90,000 check accounting for dues collected from its members over the years in exchange for three-year memberships at the Gun Range, which is actively managed by county-employed range professionals who ensure safety on the property.

That means former club members in good standing – there were 353 when the range finally opened – still have two years left to shoot before having to purchase their own memberships with the county.

Looking back, Club President Clark described the experience as both fulfilling and bittersweet, given how range management turned out.

After all, the board put in tremendous amounts of work to make the range dream a reality, committing countless hours to planning, making phone calls, scheduling and attending meetings, writing emails and much else besides, only for the club to be excluded from running the range.

But he admitted all was worth it in the end, because the Gun Club has an incredible legacy of its own, something tangible to be proud of.

Board Members were Clark, Caroline Pirie, Lamar Franklin, Wayne Roshaven, Gene Cooley, Susanne Johnson and Joan Moody, with Club Advisers Mack and Rhonda Mason.

After the vote to disband, Mason succinctly described his feelings regarding the club’s legacy.

“I’m just grateful and humbled that people came together – stepped out on faith with a common mission to get a place to shoot,” Mason said, highlighting the formation of the Gun Club and “the great interest that we had with up to 500 members at one time sticking with us.”

“In unity, there is strength, and that’s what helped us in every aspect of getting this range secured,” Mason continued. “I just thank everyone that stayed with us so long. We’ve got a beautiful range that we can all be proud of, everybody that had just a small part in it – it took everybody.”

Mason also thanked former Commissioner Paris for allowing the county to lease the land from the Forest Service; for picking up the idea and running with it to create “the beautiful facility that he wanted us to have”; and for his willingness to have the county operate the range.

“There were things we had to concede in order to get the land and (millions of dollars in federal funding),” Mason said. “Had we not made those concessions, which were brought about by the Department of Natural Resources and the Forest Service, we would not have had the land.

“So, everything just kind of fit together. We didn’t get everything we wanted, but again, everyone that had a part in it should take pride in people having a place to shoot now, and for families and others to have a place to go for future generations.”

As for future generations, Mason pictures young people utilizing the range to get interested in shooting, potentially developing skills right here at home that could help them should they ever be “deployed on foreign soil, defending this nation” or go on to serve in law enforcement.

“That’s one of the biggies to me,” Mason said. “We want people interested in shooting.”

Today, tomorrow and years from now, individual men and women; families; law enforcement officers and any other Union Countian with a desire to shoot can head on over to their local gun range to practice in a safe environment, thanks in no small part to the efforts of the Gun Club.

For more information on the Gun Range, visit <https://georgiawildlife.com/union-county-gun-range>.

# Happy Birthday...from Page 1A

her the difference.

“However, she stated that, for the most part, when her Dad tended to the corn fields, her job and the job of her older sister was to keep the creek banks/ditches trimmed back.”

Mary told Collins that she met her husband Zed at Old Liberty Baptist Church.

“Zed grew beans, and he sold these at the market,” Collins recounted. “He also grew sugar cane, and together,

the family made sorghum syrup.

“She recalls making large meals on a wood stove for everyone working in the fields in the Summertime. She said, ‘Sometimes we’d have three tables full.’”

Collins noted that Mary is “quite the conversationalist, and her humor still comes through when you talk with her.”

“Ms. Mary, if you are reading this, I kept my promise

not to talk about the jar of jelly or the doo dads,” Collins wrote in good humor. “As we wound down our conversation, she was asked if she had any advice for young people.

“She stated, ‘Don’t ever mess with the drugs; be good to everybody; and especially be good to old people.’”

Collins agreed, declaring this “good advice for us all.”

Happy Birthday, Mary, and many more!

# Grand Ole Opry...from Page 1A

on as the first person to play the electric bass in the Union County High School Marching Band.

Family friend Tom Anderson urged Potts to give the upright bass a try, inviting him to play with his gospel group, North 40, at the Union County Farmers Market.

“He needed to practice but took off with it,” Gerald describes, adding that while his son enjoys all genres, his favorite is bluegrass.

In fact, after he graduated here in 2021, he entered the Bluegrass, Old Time & Roots Music Studies Program at East Tennessee State University.

From there, his opportunities have grown, and

he’s performed with the likes of Ralph Stanley II, Tim Stafford, Kristin Scott Benson, Wayne Benson, Becky Buller, Rhonda Vincent, Barry Abernathy, Darrell Webb and Shawn Camp.

Along with famous faces, Potts has played his music at several notable venues, including the Station Inn, the Lincoln Theatre, Cameo Theater and even the Carter Family Fold and Music Center, well known through the family of June Carter and performances of Johnny Cash.

Potts also has his own YouTube channel over at Will Potts Music, where he posts some of his performances, and people will recall his time in the local band John Cochran

and The Cowhands.

When it comes to his upcoming debut at the Grand Ole Opry, Potts’ time at ETSU may have helped him; Trey Hensley, one of his teachers, was his first connection, and Hensley himself made his Opry debut at the age of 11.

In addition, Potts is dating Chassady Abernathy, a fellow ETSU bluegrass student and the daughter of Appalachian Road Show owner Barry Abernathy; that group has also had a few appearances at the Opry.

Be sure to support Potts’ musical career by listening to his music and tuning in to his two performances at the Grand Ole Opry on June 24 and July 1.

# Blairsville Pro Rodeo...from Page 1A

inside the arena or just take a relaxing pony ride.

And it’s important to remember that the rodeo isn’t just about keeping culture alive and offering fun for the whole family; it also supports the community.

Murphy said that some of the proceeds go toward scholarships for graduating local seniors, and the rodeo partners with the Blairsville Police Department for the annual Shop With a Cop Christmas Program for kids.

The gates open at 6 p.m., with the action officially starting at 8 p.m. both nights.

Advance ticket prices are \$17 for adults and \$7 for children aged 6 through 12. Those interested in advance admission can head over to the American Cowboy Store, Murphy Farms Pet Care, Bill Potts Insurance and Nelson Tractor in Blairsville.

At the gate, folks can pay \$20 for adult tickets and \$10 for kids. Either way, children 5 and under get in

for free at the arena, which is located at 73 Saddle Club Drive in Blairsville, near the intersection of SR 515 and SR 325.

The International Pro Rodeo Association-sanctioned Blairsville Pro Rodeo is produced by Circle N Rodeo Productions, with the Hedrick Rodeo Company serving as stock contractor.

For more information, visit <https://www.unioncountysaddleclub.com/blairsvilleprorodeo>.

# Third Annual Georgia State Fiddlers Convention to return to Union County Schools Fine Arts Center on June 21st

We are excited to announce that the Georgia State Fiddlers Convention will return to the Union County Fine Arts Center in Blairsville, GA June 21, 2025. Admission is \$5.

The event will begin with registration at 8 AM and competition starting at 9 AM. There is no entry fee for contestants. In addition to junior and senior fiddler, other categories include banjo, mandolin, flat picking guitar, finger style guitar, old time banjo,

bluegrass band, dulcimer, dobro, twelve and under beginning fiddle, and twelve and under beginner musician other than fiddle. Over \$7,000 in prize money will be awarded. We expect participants from around the southeastern region and the competition to be exciting and entertaining! In addition to the music competition there will also be crafts and food vendors.

The event’s purpose is to showcase musical talent and preserve the rich cultural heritage of the region while providing economic benefit to the community. As a tax exempt 501c3 the event is dependent on sponsorships for prize money and operating expenses. If you would like to make a tax-deductible contribution it can be mailed to Georgia State Fiddlers Convention P.O. Box 370 Hiawassee, GA 30546. If you are interested in volunteering email [Georgiafiddlersconvention@gmail.com](mailto:Georgiafiddlersconvention@gmail.com).



**GEORGIA STATE FIDDLERS CONVENTION**

BLAIRSVILLE, GEORGIA

For additional information including rules and judges as well as advance contestant registration visit: <https://georgiastatefiddlersconvention.org>.

## Codependents Anonymous Weekly Meeting

Codependents Anonymous Meeting:

Self-Help group offering a 12 Step Recovery Program meets on Tuesdays from 10:30 a.m. - 11:30 a.m. at Rivers of Peace, RCO 166 Josh Hall Road, Suite 4, Blue Ridge, GA 30513.

All are welcome.